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Plugging a gap? Soft skills courses and learning for work

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Abstract

Governments across Europe have been encouraged by the EU to take measures to upskill their workforce to ensure growth and social inclusion. Low-skilled workers are particular targets and learning providers and employers are expected to provide learning opportunities for them. However, research shows that those with low skills often lack confidence and require support to engage in learning. This paper examines an ESF-funded course aimed at developing soft skills in low-skilled employees through a course developed by a Scottish college. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with learners from two cohorts of the course to examine their experiences and gains from the course. Learners' accounts demonstrate benefits from the course but workplace culture impacted on the level of gains. The paper questions the ability of one-off courses to deliver the aims of policy and suggests more coordinated and sustained effort is required.

Introduction

Over the past thirty years in the UK and other industrialised countries there have been major changes in the composition of the labour market. The knowledge economy and service sectors have expanded and the manufacturing sector has declined, this has been coupled with the growth of skilled, rather than unskilled, jobs (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2008; Sanders et al, 2011). It is well documented that individuals with low formal qualifications have lower employment rates and Eurostat data show an unequal impact of the recession on employment rates by educational level. The employment rate for those with low qualifications (ISCED 0-2) in the UK was 61.5 in 2005 and 52.6 in 2011, a decrease of 8.9 points. Individuals with tertiary qualifications had an employment rate of 87.4 in 2005 and 82.6 in 2011, a decrease of 4.8 points (Eurostat, 2012). Recognising these perceived risks and the importance of qualifications in securing and retaining employment, European governments are increasingly emphasising the need to invest in the on-going training of the working age population, and are encouraging employers to recognise the urgency and necessity of fostering workplace learning (CEC, 2011). Recent EU resolutions stress that every member states should: *promote effective incentives for those within and outside employment, ensuring every adult the chance to retrain or to move one step up in their qualification* (Council of the European Union, 2011). The latest Scottish lifelong learning strategy stresses the need for *'encouraging workplace cultures that enable people to develop and best use their skills'* (p. 41) and argues that *'employer investment in skills is complementary to investments in plant, machinery and ICT ...'* (p. 43) (Scottish Government, 2010a). The extent to which the government is able to communicate these messages to employers as well as employees' awareness of the risks and challenges of globalisation, are likely to impact on attitudes and uptake of learning and training opportunities at work.

How do employers perceive learning and training? A Scottish survey (Scottish Government, 2010b) found that whilst nearly two thirds (61%) of employers had funded training during 2009; employees in smaller establishments were least likely to receive off-the-job training and those already highly skilled were most likely to be offered training. Around half of the employers (48%) stated that they would have provided more training but lack of funds (62%) and problems with releasing staff from work (51%) impacted on training. Most (85%) of the training received was job specific or related to health and safety/first aid (72%) that are statutory requirements. When employers were asked to identify any skills gaps they prioritised 'soft skills' such as teamwork, problem solving skills, leadership and customer service skills (Scottish Government, 2010b, p. 30).

Research shows that access to learning is influenced by organisational structures especially in relation to people's occupational positioning and status within an organisation. For example, Ashton (2004) found in his study of a large organisation that, for senior staff, learning was expected and encouraged, their learning was facilitated within the organisation and their jobs were designed in ways in which learning could be maximised. In contrast the learning of more junior staff was predominantly task-focused and was effectively constrained by the organisation. Similarly the Scottish survey (Scottish Government, 2010b) showed that the 'low-skilled' workforce was the least likely to receive training. These inequalities in access to learning opportunities in the workplace were confirmed by the National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) 2005 Scotland Report (Ormston, et al, 2007) that found that 85% of those with higher-level qualifications (ISCED level 5) had taken part in taught learning in the 3 years preceding the survey whereas only 23% with no qualifications (ISCED level 1-2) had participated.

Given the value of soft skills to employers and the importance of extending opportunities for learning in the workplace this paper investigates the impact of a short course that was designed to help 'low-skilled'¹ employees develop these skills. It draws on an evaluation of an ESF funded project entitled 'Skills for Scotland' that addressed workforce development. We focus on one aspect of this project in order to examine the experiences and perceptions of six employees. In particular we explore what the participants gained from the course, the extent to which this learning is likely to translate into changed workplace practices, the workplace learning culture and support provided by employers/managers.

The paper first discusses workplace learning, the methodology is then explained followed by the findings. The concluding section analyses the issues emerging out of the findings and the literature.

Workplace learning

Although the main purpose of the workplace is production it has gained in importance as a learning environment. Illeris (2011) stresses the two-way relationship between the individual learning process and work; he argues that the individual is influenced by work practices but also interprets these practices. This leads to a dynamic interrelationship between the individual and the social level where these two combine to shape particular workplace identities and particular workplace practices. Thus learning is both a component and an outcome of individuals' engagement in work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Billett, 2006; Wenger, 1998) because people bring a set of beliefs and dispositions to their working lives. These different organisational environments and the level of support offered interact with individual's orientations to learning because people also identify with the social expectations of their 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) in terms of both what they do and how they go about it.

Learning is not only shaped by the diverse ways in which individuals elect to engage in workplace activities but importantly by workplaces themselves. For example Sanders et al (2011) showed that lower educated worker's general attitude towards participation in learning and training was strongly influenced by the perceived expectations of important others and if this was positive then an individual became more motivated (p. 404). Felstead et al (2009) have shown the strong impact on the nature of workplace learning on how work is organised and how wider economic forces influence it. They draw on the 'expansive-restrictive framework' developed by Fuller and Unwin (2004). This framework provides a conceptual and analytical tool for evaluating the quality of learning environments and for analysing an organisation's approach to workforce development. Fuller and Unwin (2004) identified three participatory dimensions: (i) opportunities for engaging in multiple (and overlapping) communities of practice at and beyond the workplace; (ii) access to a multidimensional approach to the acquisition of expertise through the organisation of work and job design; (iii) the opportunity to pursue knowledge-based courses related to work. Organisations with a restrictive approach impose many limitations on learning, whereas those with an expansive approach foster a wide array of formal, non-formal and informal approaches to and opportunities for learning.

¹ The term is used to mean those who had left school with low or no formal qualifications

This paper is focusing on the impact of a training course so as well as the Fuller and Unwin framework we will be drawing on the framework of Hefler and Markowitsch (2012) who distinguish between reactive and expansive training environments. Workplaces with reactive environments have low levels of training and training occurs only when it is unavoidable whereas expansive environments optimise training opportunities (see table 1 below).

Insert table 1 here

In addition, issues of power and responsibility at the level of the organisation shape expectations about learning because ‘collective discourses shape personal worlds’ (Sfard & Prusak, 2005: 15). Broad structural conditions and targeted policy measures also play a substantial role in ‘forming the circumstances faced by individuals and limit the feasible alternatives to choose from, and therefore they can “bound” individual agency’ (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009:196). Moreover, access to learning is influenced by organisational structures especially in relation to people’s occupational positioning and status within an organisation with those at the lowest positions having the least influence (Ashton, 2004). So whilst workplace learning can play a vital role in providing adults with relevant competences it requires more than just tinkering with what is currently available.

The course

The soft skills course was developed and delivered on college premises by a Scottish college and the learner/employees came from businesses in and around the city. The college also provided a 5-day higher-level course aimed at new managers, employer demand for this higher level course was considerably greater than for the course aimed at low-skilled workers.

The course consisted of one day per fortnight for eight weeks (4 days in total) and aimed to develop skills in the area of time management, assertiveness training and effective communication in the workplace. It used a learner-centred teaching approach, with activities for the whole group as well as small group activities followed by reflection on the aims of the activity. The reflective element, focusing on aspects of an individual’s work, was followed up in learning logs that the learners were encouraged to complete in their own time. The course was developed specifically for these groups of learners but it drew on Personal Development Award² (PDA) modules accredited by the national Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)³ which meant that it was possible for learners to gain a SQA accredited unit through completing a work-based assessment. The course developer and tutor expressed some apprehension when developing the course especially in identifying the level. The course was aimed at the low paid and low-skilled but, in the tutor’s words:

It was very difficult to gauge ... because what assumptions can you make about people who are low paid and low-skilled? You can't assume ... how much they have done in the past experience wise, how much work experience they have. Is it going to mean that some of these people are from another country, so culturally it may be very difficult for them to learn this way? I am finding it really difficult to find the pitch.

The impact of this uncertainty is explored further in the discussion.

Methods

The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews augmented by a whole day observation of the course and website information about the companies. The data reported on here comes from two cohorts of learners taking part in courses delivered in March and May of 2009. We recognise that these learners were first and foremost employees; however, as we are interested in their

² Personal Development Awards which are available in a range of different areas are mainly aimed at people in work.

³ SQA is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland, see: <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/5656.html>

learning, we refer to them as ‘learners’. There were eight learners on the March cohort of the course and all agreed to be interviewed; there were 13 learners on May cohort of the course and ten agreed to be interviewed. The interviews took place shortly after the course was completed and, wherever possible, a second interview was carried out around four months later. We also tried to contact employers/line managers of all the learners; however, not all were willing to participate mainly due to lack of time though one cited he had no knowledge of the course. Table 2 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the learners, their place of employment and job title. The main focus here is on six of the learners from two different organisations (those highlighted in bold). Each of these learners was interviewed twice. The main reasons for focusing on these learners are that: they came from two contrasting types of businesses, one is a private sector construction company and the other is a third sector care in the community organisation; the learners all left school with no or low formal qualifications (lower secondary only); they are in the older age bracket and individuals with these characteristics are less likely to engage in any form of post compulsory learning (Green and Janmatt, 2011; Tett, 2012; Tuckett and Aldridge, 2010). They are presented as two case studies starting with a brief overview of the companies. The company data came from the employees and their perceptions of the company as well as publicly available data. All the names of the participants are fictitious in order to ensure anonymity.

Insert table 2 here

Findings

Case Study 1: Care in the Community – Support workers

The company

The company was a Scottish charity set up about thirty years ago in response to the move towards care in the community. It aimed to provide services to people with learning disabilities and other support needs. This included running residential care homes, care in the community and short breaks and respite care. It now supports more than 1000 people, employs just under 2000 staff, is an ‘Investor in People’ organisation and an SQA approved centre. All three employees mentioned that training opportunities were good within the company, there were annual staff development reviews and the employees felt well supported by their line managers in any learning they were undertaking. Although there was a union at the workplace none of the learners were union members.

The learners’ backgrounds: Deirdre, Alison and Jim

Deirdre was in her late thirties, married with a teenage daughter. She had left school without qualifications and attributed her lack of academic achievement at school to her low confidence and lack of support from her mother. After leaving school she joined a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and then worked in a range of low paid, retail jobs before starting in her current job as a full-time support worker. She was part of a team responsible for the care of two women with profound learning disabilities and she enjoyed her job. She had been hesitant in taking part in our interviews and also explained that she was embarrassed about her lack of qualifications:

Probably as I say you didn’t feel confident enough, didn’t ask questions and probably put yourself down as a failure, can’t do this, won’t do this, but now I get embarrassed, if you are going for an interview or filling in an application form, what’s your [qualifications], nothing, not done nothing, but not stopped working, I’ve always worked, just get embarrassed. (Deirdre)

Alison had left school with only one ‘O’ grade (lower secondary), this she attributed to coming from an Army family and having moved a lot. She was around fifty and had worked in various low-skilled jobs before moving to her current job as a full-time support worker. She liked the job, describing it as *fine, has its moments like everything* and she also said that she had always wanted to work in care.

Jim, aged 55, had left school at the age of 15 with a school-leaving certificate (lower secondary). He

had been brought up by his grandmother and felt that his low qualifications were due to her lack of support. After leaving school he completed a City and Guilds in Building and Glazing; he could have got further qualifications but his employer was not prepared to fund it and he could not afford to pay for it. He left the building trade, went into engineering to get better pay and worked in that trade for 30 years until he was made redundant in 2008. He was keen to learn:

anything you learned was good for me because as I say when I was younger at school you were always pigeon-holed depending on your learning skills and the teacher you had, you could be pushed to the side a lot. If you get an opportunity, [when] you're older, you're taking it in. (Jim)

On being made redundant he signed up for a Health Academy course which is a pre-employment training course guaranteeing you an interview for a job. The guaranteed interview did not result in a job. He had been unemployed for eight months when he was offered a part-time contract of 30 hours per week with his current employer. Like the other two, he enjoyed his work.

The soft skills course

They had all been encouraged to do the course by their line managers and had been told it would help them with the SVQ⁴ 3 in Social Care that they were all required to do. Alison, like many of the other learners, was dubious about the course initially as she was unsure about its content:

Well, at first I thought to myself, 'is this really for us, are we benefiting from that?' but now that it's finished, it's about time management and tasks and how can you do things in a timescale and a certain way ... managing your job basically, isn't it? (Alison)

For Jim the main gains had been identifying some of his strengths and weaknesses. In addition, he mentioned that the soft skills course had provided him with the confidence to speak to people and to take part in our interview:

Going on those two or three days, what [the tutor] took us through, communication and talking ... I wouldn't be able to speak to you now if it wasn't for things like that ... what I've learned on the course, a closed question or an open question depending on what you want, if they're not settling down [referring to his 'clients'] you just try and change the subject, deflect it onto something else, television or going out for a walk. (Jim)

Deirdre found it difficult to articulate her gains from the course but she did highlight the knowledge she had gained about body language as being important:

I thought it was like, you should pick up on people's body language and always observe people, found myself doing that after going on the course ... it's kind of made you pick up on things more so I found it was more to be aware of people's body language ... (Deirdre)

However all three had found the reflective element of the course challenging. Alison referred to herself as '*a talker not a writer*' and Deirdre explained her confusion as well:

What are we meant to be writing? So I was just like going through every unit and when I went home ... writing on the reflective log how I felt and that but I said, some of the bits, 'what am I meant to be doing'? (Deirdre)

A key message for the tutor from these three learners was the need to slow down the pace of the course. Alison referred to it as being particularly difficult for people who had not been in education for a long time:

when you're away from something [referring to education] for so long and then you're

⁴ Scottish Vocational Qualification, level 3 is at upper secondary level

suddenly hit with it again, it's not even like a refresher you've got to do eh, not like a build up that you can go onto, you're there and you've to do it, I'm finding that with this SVQ as well but then I've got more time to do it in. (Alison)

Deirdre's advice for the tutor was:

Slow down a bit! Said that to him the first week because I was like, he would just say to me go on that page, you're trying to read it, and then he's talking over you and you're trying to concentrate and then it's right next page then ... I says 'is it just me'? and another guy, Jim, he said 'no I'm feeling like that as well'. We're not stupid but feel that he needs to slow the pace down a bit so you can actually think, 'what are you wanting us to do?' (Deirdre)

Deirdre had been so concerned about it that she had spoken to her line manager about it. The support provided by the line manager was invaluable for Deirdre:

I was getting myself a wee bit worked up and at one point didn't know what I was doing ... Ailsa (line manager) was really good... at helping us think of ideas [and prompted us] 'well why don't you do that, this is what you should do', she has been really good ... without her I wouldn't have had a clue what I was going to be doing ... if it wasn't for my manager I wouldn't have known what I was doing (Deirdre)

Jim also mentioned that the workplace was a supportive environment both in terms of general aspects of work and also in the area of training:

Oh yeah when we have our team meetings as I said earlier, everything's brought up and if we have any other business, you could bring up anything and they'll put it forward to the managers if you want extra training. (Jim)

As can be seen these learners felt that the course had benefited them but they struggled with the reflective element of the course and thought that the pace was too rapid. However, they acknowledged, in the second interview, that the reflective element of the course was helping them with the SVQ 3 course they started after completing the short skills course. They were well supported in their learning by their employer and therefore differed from the learners in case study 2 reported on below.

Case Study 2: construction workers

The company

The company provided a range of building services such as plumbing, heating and electrical installations and worked mainly on public buildings. The line manager of these learners declined to be interviewed stating that it was not company policy and that he did not know anything about the course. Although there was a union at the workplace none of the learners were union members.

According to the three employees,, the company did all the mandatory training; however, opportunities for training seemed to be entirely driven by legislative demands and limited to certain members of staff. There were no procedures for staff appraisal. The recession had led to 30 members of staff being made redundant. The impact was explained by Ricky as *well we've not got big jobs in at the moment because everything's dried up*. The overall impression from the three interviewees was that communication within the company relied heavily on verbal instructions and relatively few instructions were written down. There was a company website but this contained only a front page and had not moved beyond 'being under construction' over the time-span of our project.

The learners' background: Ricky, Brian and Mike

Ricky, in his late fifties, had left school at the earliest opportunity with no qualifications. He was helped by a neighbour to write an application for an apprenticeship to become a heating engineer. Brian was in his late forties, had left school with four 'O' grades (lower secondary) in English,

arithmetic, woodwork and geography. Like Ricky he had completed an apprenticeship in heating engineering. Ricky and Brian were both foremen and had worked in the company for a long time. Mike, aged 40, had left school with three Standard Grades (lower secondary). He mentioned that he was not a *pen-pusher* and that he did not know how to use a computer. His father, who was a foreman, had been his role model. Mike did an apprenticeship in electrical engineering after leaving school and had got his apprenticeship through his father's contacts. Mike was a senior craftsman, a level below Ricky and Brian and had worked in a number of companies in his home city and further afield. He had no interest in undertaking further formal qualifications but would have liked to have been supported by the company in doing his gas certificate. However, this course was expensive and the company was not willing to sponsor him. In contrast, Ricky had been required to do the gas fitting course which he had found challenging because it involved maths. Mike considered the company similar to many that he had worked in but he also referred to it as being old-fashioned in the way it worked.

The soft skills course

All three had been informed by their manager that they were to attend the course. They were all ambivalent and, according to Mike, were not told why or what it was about:

Got a text message [saying], Mike, you'll be going to [the college], 9 o'clock, Thursday morning for four weeks, that was it. Go there, do it ... I don't know how he choose me (Mike)

They found the first day confusing but felt that the course had improved as it progressed:

The first day of the course, we couldn't see how it was going to help us in the workplace ... [we don't] generally have team meetings, we don't have discussions about the job, we get a drawing and that's what we've got to produce ... but second week, third week, I got a lot out of it (Brian)

All three were able to identify some aspects of the course that had been useful to them. Ricky referred to himself as having '*quietened down a bitty*'. It had also impacted on his communication habits as he claimed that he now annotated drawings to provide written information for his supervisees. In the past, he had simply told people what to do:

I write down on the drawings the way they [e.g. architect, consultant] want it done and things like that whereas before I would just keep it in my head, had to tell people what to do and then the next 'right what [are] you wanting me to do now', whereas I am writing it down so they can see what I'm on about so they could see it themselves (Ricky)

Brian initially mentioned that had learnt a bit about task management:

I've picked up a few wee bits ... task management, break it down into smaller parts so you don't overload them [the people he was responsible for] with information ... and time management ... and again, when something goes wrong ... some of the guys do get aggressive so I've picked up that as well, how to deal with [that], because I used to get aggression and go aggressive back (Brian)

However, in the second interview he was slightly less enthusiastic when he summarised his gains from the course as: *wee snippets that could help us but nothing much*. In a similar vein, Mike felt that the course had some useful learning; however, he hinted that it might not translate into workplace practices:

It was alright, a wee bit of benefit, it made you understand how to do things different, and how you do your day to day running of some stuff. Time will tell, obviously once we do a portfolio ... got to do a project (Mike)

The main reason for Mike's scepticism seemed to relate to the way the company operated. He felt that there were no opportunities for applying what they had learnt during the course in the workplace:

I could see what it was coming from [the course] but as I say ... being realistic we wouldn't be able to do it within work. Maybe be able to do that in an office or something, on site you wouldn't be able to do that. You could try, don't get me wrong ... but most of the guys we've got are scatterbrains ... [in] some of the [other construction] companies it would work ... they're more disciplined (Mike)

Mike explained this further and mentioned that communications within the company were mainly through spoken instructions and paperwork that was written by hand rather than on a computer:

Nine times out of ten, if your line manager tells you to do something, you just do it because it's on his head, if anything goes wrong, so if he phones us and says you're going to do that, you just do it (Mike)

Like the three learners in case study 1, Brian and Ricky struggled with the reflective element of the course and felt that there was too much content in the course:

I think he [tutor] was just trying to cram too much into each session, that's the only thing, everything else he was explaining was right, it was just somebody like me to take all this in and just too much ... see Veronica and the other two girls there were taking it in their strides (Ricky)

They also found the reflective aspect of the course difficult to deal with:

What I really didn't like and I still struggle with ... where you've got the reflective learning, why you started, what you've learnt and then you had to write down what you had learnt, what I am saying is some of the stuff I already know, I've already done, I would have done the task management as expanded on a wee bit, so I still can't get my head round this reflective ... it's like you're asking me to evaluate myself and I find that hard (Brian)

Mike did not comment on the reflective element but mentioned that he would struggle with the assessment (which, in the end, he did not complete) as it would involve writing. However, in spite of being negative of the value of the course, Mike felt, like the rest, that the tutor had done a very good job and that the teaching had been well done and interesting:

I think he [tutor] did actually really good to be honest. I think he broke it down as little as possible and it was interesting ... a lot of people were laughing at it but being realistic if you actually sit back and you see what he's getting at, you actually pay attention, he [tutor] is actually doing well (Mike)

Discussion

The learners from these two case studies have a number of similarities. They were generally older, the youngest was Deirdre who was in her late thirties; they had left school with, at the most, lower secondary qualifications; and they had been 'sent' on the course by their respective managers. All managed to point towards some gains from the course but they struggled with the reflective element of the course and the need to write things down.

There were also a number of differences. The men had all got practical vocational qualifications on leaving school and the three men from the construction company had completed apprenticeships; they had also managed to retain the jobs for which they were trained. However, given the current economic crisis that has impacted on the construction industry they are potentially vulnerable. Jim with a lower vocational qualification had not retained his original job. Jim had, unlike the other three

men welcomed the opportunity to learn and had been the least negative about the course at the beginning. There were marked differences in the extent to which the learners were encouraged to take part in the course, the support at work during the course and the extent to which they could build on the learning from the course.

Drawing on the literature as well as the findings there are number of themes emerging as follows:

1. interaction between the individual's attitudes to learning and the workplace culture
2. learning content, methods and the tutor
3. Attitudes to communication skills and reflection

Interaction between the individual's attitudes to learning and the workplace culture

The findings demonstrate that there is an interaction between individuals' attitudes to learning and the workplace culture. Researchers (e.g. Tett & MacLachlan, 2007; Wojecki, 2007) have suggested that engaging in learning in adulthood can have a significant role in the formation of the identities of participants and consequently of their ability to reach their learning goals. However, a person's activities and choices are both constrained and enabled by their horizons for action and this has a major impact on the decision to engage in learning since people bring a set of conceptions, procedures, beliefs, values and dispositions to their work and also identify with the social expectations of their 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) in terms of what they do and how they go about it.

Billet (2006, 2) has argued that 'learning through engagement in work appears to be mediated by individuals' subjectivities' and our interviewees all expressed their doubts about their ability to benefit from the course whilst they were also all able to show what they had gained from it. Other research has acknowledged the role of an individual's attitude to learning but has added that in the case of low educated workers the role of support from management and co-workers is vital in increasing positive attitudes to participation in training (Sander, et al, 2011). This support is part of the workplace culture, which in our research was shown to have an impact both on attitude to participation as well as the use in the workplace of the skills developed during the course. Drawing on Hefler's and Markowitsch's framework, the care in the community company could be categorised as having an 'expansive' culture: training activity was high and the use of training and other opportunities to support learning at the workplace were optimised. In contrast the construction company seemed to have a 'reactive' training culture. Its training was mainly in reaction to an externally defined need (e.g. to comply with legislation) and training was restricted to smaller groups of employees. The employees who attended the course were not sure why they had been sent on the course. Although we could not ascertain why they were asked to attend because the employer declined to be interviewed claiming he had no knowledge of the course. It is therefore likely that they participated because the company was offered the course at no cost at a time when work was slack. There was no attempt to ensure that the learning from the course developed better workplace practices and no opportunity to develop the learning further.

Learning content, methods and the tutor

The course included many features of what is considered good practice in teaching adults. It was learner-centred, it included practical activities which were used to illustrate the theoretical aspects of the course as well as providing opportunities for social interaction. Our observations and interviews showed that the tutor respected the learners as adults, that he tried to engage them in such a way that they took responsibility for their own learning but that he took ultimate responsibility for structuring the learning activities and ensuring that the learners engaged with the learning. An essential aspect of effective learner-centred teaching is creating time and space to allow for construction of meaning (Hillier, 2012).

The tutor had developed the course specifically for the project and had taken care to incorporate aspects of work into the course which would allow those that wanted to undertake a workplace based assessment to gain a recognised qualification. However, he had expressed concerns when developing this particular course (for 'low-skilled' employees) as he recognised the problematic nature of that term and felt that there was a danger of making assumptions about people's actual levels of skills. He

had no opportunity to engage with the learners prior to them starting the course since selection for attendance was made by the employer. As can be seen from the findings, there were varying levels of engagement by the employer in relation to the benefits of the course.

Our interviewees reported that the tutor was excellent and even the small number who felt they had gained little from the course said they had enjoyed it and appreciated the way the tutor delivered the course. It is clear then, that the classroom environment created by the tutor promoted learning of the kind he was trying to develop.

European research identified the classroom environment as crucial in fostering motivation in adults and found that higher levels of satisfaction were reported when learners were more actively involved in the learning process, enjoyed support and respect from the teacher and where the study programme was well organized and had a clear sense of direction (Boeren, et al, 2012: 81). In this case the tutor was constrained by the remit of the project which required the delivery of the course to a certain number of 'beneficiaries' in a set period of time, and also by the limited support and resources provided by the college, the requirements to fit the course into a nationally recognised qualifications as well as lack of direct contact with employers and employees/learners prior to the course.

Attitudes to communication skills and reflection

Across the labour market there has been an increasing need for written communication (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2008). The course was not intended to develop writing skills but required learners to use writing in their reflective logs and this created difficulties both in terms of having to write as well as 'reflect' on their learning. Although there were differences among the six learners, they all shared an antipathy towards written communication and struggled to deal with the reflective element in the course. They also differed in what their workplaces expected because care workers are increasingly required to write reports and record aspects of on-going daily care. In addition, the legislative requirement for care workers to be qualified at SVQ level 3 has meant that these workers have to demonstrate sufficient written skills and the ability to reflect on their practice. It was evident that there was a need for a certain level of writing skills in this organisation and this seemed to have been accepted by the three learners/employees in this organisation. They also viewed the course as valuable preparation for the SVQ level 3 and noted that attainment of this qualification would lead to economic gains. The course had also increased the learners' confidence in learning which all commented on as positive.

However, there was little evidence for the need of writing skills and reflection on learning by the learners from the construction company. In terms of Illeris' model of workplace learning the incentive to learn for the individuals was lacking and the workplace culture relied on mainly verbal communication with little emphasis on writing. It was clear that Ricky had recognised the potential value of writing things down for those he was working with; however, the practices in the workplace were unlikely to sustain his commitment to this practice. The company was described as old-fashioned by one of the learners. Written communication was seen as the domain of some within the company, for example the office staff, but not essential for those working on site. There seemed to be very limited benefit of the course either at a personal or at work level for these learners.

As for reflection on practice and on learning, this was a concept that all the learners struggled with. In part the problem was the pace of the course, all six felt that they did not have sufficient time to understand what it was they were expected to do. As we noted above the tutor had some difficulty in gauging the pitch of the course during planning but he was keen to build in the kind of reflective learning that would help learners take charge of their own learning. This is in line with good practice, for example, as suggested by Illeris (2011). However, incorporating reflection on learning in a course of this nature and short duration was probably over-ambitious and did not sufficiently recognise the complexities involved in reflection especially when it involves doing this in writing. Reflective practice and the teaching of 'reflection' has become a standard part of many courses but the concept is hazy and can be interpreted in different ways (Hatton and Smith, 1995). In addition, even in the professions the use of reflection in learning poses challenges as it can be threatening and takes time to develop (Fook and Askeland, 2007), so it is hardly surprising that these learners found it a difficult

concept to grasp.

Conclusion

It is evident that this course offered some valuable learning to the participants but the extent to which these benefits translated into beneficial changes to the work practices of employees depended on the learning culture in their company. In addition, the extent to which they led to an overall increase in workplace learning as envisaged by government and EU strategy and increases in employees' skills is questionable. The courses were one off and dependent on project funding which influenced who could participate in the course. Project funding of this nature depends on attracting sufficient learners (beneficiaries) and there is therefore pressure on the learning provider/grant holder to recruit with potentially limited attention paid to whether *all* learners will benefit. There was no mainstreaming of the courses; rather the intention after the delivery of these courses was to develop stand-alone units which would be offered to companies at a cost. This is a long way from the fundamental changes that Illeris suggests require *engagement, goal direction and resources* (2011, p. 161) for the workplace to become a place of learning. It also fails to recognise that, whilst a positive classroom experience can enhance the learning of low-skilled workers, these employees face considerably greater barriers to learning than high-skilled workers. Not only do they often lack the financial resources to pay for courses they also face more dispositional barriers (Rubenson, and Desjardins, 2009) and many lack support from the workplace (Sanders, et al, 2011). We would suggest that when developing courses for low-skilled workers it is important to take note of the research evidence on what makes for good workplace learning and the importance of expansive learning environments (Fuller & Unwin, 2004).

Whilst the courses we have investigated were specifically designed to address skills that employers have asked for, the manner in which they were introduced and the lack of embedding in workplace practices has meant that neither workers nor employers have benefited to the extent that might have been expected. Workplaces will not be successful if they remain static so encouraging the active involvement of employees is clearly in employers' interests. However, as we have shown, the culture of the workplace needs to be responsive and offer integrated support to employees if this is to be successful. It also demonstrates, as Felstead et al (2009) have argued, that learning is not a silver bullet to be fired to correct problems but rather requires a radical rethink of employer practices and policy responses so that 'learning to work' and 'working to learn' are simultaneously carried out and maximised.

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Table 1: Reactive versus Expansive Training Cultures – Defining characteristics

Reactive Training Cultures	Expansive Training Cultures
Training mainly seen as a cost factor and therefore minimised	Training is understood as an investment with significant value added
The average training activity (over a multi-year period) is comparatively low	The training activity is high and tends to make full use of the potential to support workplace learning
Experiences with and competences about the use of training are restricted to smaller groups of employees	Experiences with and competences about the use of training are widely diffused within the organisation, providing a framework for further improvements
Training mainly reacts to a need, the training volume depends on the increase/decrease of this need	Within an existing potential (Training Potential), the use of training and other opportunities to support learning at the workplace are optimised; changes in external requirements influence only the composition of the range of training activities, not the level of activity
Changes in external factors may lead directly to more/less training	Changes in external factors have little effect on the level of training activities

Source: Hefler and Markowitsch, (2012: 115)

Table 2: Key characteristics of learners/employees

Name	Age band	Gender	Highest level of formal education	Employer	Current job title
Soft skills lower level course, March cohort					
Deirdre	35-44	Female	None	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Keith	32	Male	Undergraduate degree	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Mark	42	Male	Lower secondary	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Jim	55	Male	Lower Secondary: City & Guilds in Building and Glazing	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Neil	49	Male	Lower secondary7: SVQ 2 Social Care	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Sandy	35	Male	Upper secondary	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Alison	45-54	Female	Lower secondary	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Bob	31	Male	Undergraduate degree	Care in the community charity	Support Worker
Soft skills lower level course, May cohort					
Aileen	25	Female	Upper secondary: SVQ3	Homeless charity	Support Officer

			Social Care		
Debbie	35-44	Female	Upper secondary	Homeless charity	Support Officer
Tony	45-54	Male	Not known	Food charity franchise	Project Worker
Greig	45-54	Male	Undergraduate degree: Accountancy	Food charity franchise	Project Worker
Michelle	29	Female	Upper secondary: secretarial	Arts Centre charity	HR and Operations Officer
Brian	49	Male	Lower secondary: Apprenticeship	Construction	Foreman
Mike	40	Male	Lower secondary: Apprenticeship	Construction	Senior Craftsman
Ricky	55-64	Male	Lower secondary: Apprenticeship	Construction	Foreman
Veronica	25-34	Female	Upper secondary: English	Sports	Commercial Assistant
Noel	34	Male	Undergraduate degree: Business Administration	Public Sector	Chargehand